

# Volunteers—the ties that bind

When Americans act like most good people would in a tragedy or crisis, their fellow citizens are surprised. They are supposed to be too jaded, too complacent, too unfeeling to give a damn about other people.

There are a lot of surprised people this morning on Staten Island — indeed, throughout the tri-state area — after the response the Willowbrook strike engendered.

More than 2,240 volunteers (the 8 p.m. count yesterday), working 300 or 400 at a time, averted a possible disaster at Willowbrook over the weekend.

They came from all five boroughs and throughout New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. There was even a vacationing Floridian. More than 1,300 on Easter Sunday alone. They responded to press appeals, word of mouth, and pleas from pulpits of all denominations.

They included doctors, nurses, housewives, laborers, students, military personnel and federal employes.

Most were young, long-haired, and in sympathy with the strikers' demands. There were black and whites.

They worked as switchboard operators, plumbers, house parents, ward attendants, truck drivers, laundry sorters, dishwashers, scullery help, kitchen help, cooks, power house attendants and launderers.

They were supervised and they improvised. They were told what to do and told others what to do. They went home and came back for more.

They braved a picket line, braved confusion, braved the world of the Willowbrook mentally retarded and their most basic needs.

They did work that they wouldn't do for any reasonable salary to help people that they thank God they're not like.

They did all these things for a variety of reasons.

They included:

Willie Williams, Clenso Allen, Willie Small, Sam Gardner, Dana Cunningham, Abraham Hill and Danny Elliott — seven formidable looking black men from Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn who showed up late Saturday night to help.

They were sent to a lounge building (in the words of the administrator who sent them). They cleaned and mopped the place. "Once you see it, you don't know how blessed you really are," said Clenso Allen.

A bystander remarked, "I'm getting religion today." Clenso Allen replied, "I couldn't think of a better day."

They included:

Jack Casey, 26, of 624 Metropolitan Ave. and Sam Gulisano, 22, of 625 Metropolitan Ave., West Brighton. Both were put to work Saturday night feeding, changing and cleaning young retarded boys. Unpleasant work. "It was an experience," Casey remarked later. Why did he show up in the first place? "I don't know, I'm just here." And Gulisano said, "I wanted to help."

They included:

Cormac Gordon, 24, of 396 Bard Ave., West Brighton, who got off work at 4 a.m. Sunday and was at Willowbrook at 6:30 a.m.

They included:

Three girls. Randi Orlando, 21, sisters Betsy Coleman, 20, and Sydney Coleman, 21, all of Kearney, N.J. who worked the post-operative ward in Building 2 and handled ambulatory and difficult patients.

Sydney Coleman said, "I wanted to do something. I can understand the pickets, but I think we should do something here."

The three girls fed, bathed, cleaned patients and cleaned the wards and the kitchen. They went home to change yesterday afternoon and returned. They had slept in the infirmary the night before.

The volunteers came in such droves that toward the end of the weekend a certain amount of screening was possible. Six-year-olds and up (they were that young) made laundry runs with hand-pulled carts. Those over 14 were assigned to baby wards, over 18 to the older children or adult wards.

"We need 15 people desperately in Building 29," an administrator announced to a large group of volunteers in the main building yesterday afternoon. "It is feeding spastics on a one to one basis. If you've come here to work, go over there. Try it. If you can't take it, come back here."

Fifteen persons filed out the door, willing to try.

Finally, there was another kind of volunteer at Willowbrook last weekend — employes who did not go out on strike. One of them was Mrs. Anna McKenna of Midland Beach. Why didn't she strike?

"Against children? I'd rather die."

—LAWRENCE DEMARIA